

CZAR OF FAIRHAVEN

A Portrait of
JOHN I. BRYANT

By
Mabel Hoyle Knipe

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Material Researched and Integrated

By

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Fairhaven, Massachusetts

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— DEDICATION —

This Work is Dedicated
with
Respect, Gratitude
and
Affection
to

WALTER SILVEIRA

Fairhaven Selectman
for
Thirty-Five Years

M.H.K.



CZAR OF FAIRHAVEN

A Portrait Of

— JOHN I. BRYANT —

In the first half of the 19th century, the sad little country of Ireland was experiencing some of its most fearsome trials. Thwarted by disinterested English land owners, the Irish tenant farmer and the humble laborer alike knew keen discouragement. In 1845-46, a potato famine of formidable proportions afflicted the land, and near starvation forced the flight of great numbers of the Irish to American shores. This exodus continued uninterrupted for many years — and from County Cork, in 1853, John and Jeannette (Brown) Bryant and their three young sons came to America for a new start. The middle son, later to be known succinctly as “John I.” was but three years old when his mother carried him down the gang-plank. He had been born in Bandon, County Cork on March 1, 1850.

The little family stayed briefly at St. John, New Brunswick; and at Danielson, Connecticut before taking up permanent location in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where John I. started work in the old Wamsutta Cotton Mill at the age of nine. The Bryants did well in their adopted country, and when the American civil war broke out in 1861, the father and the oldest son enlisted — two of a quota from New Bedford. John Bryant, the elder, was killed the next year (1862) in the battle of Fredericksburg. Two years later, when John I. was only fourteen, his mother also died, and three young orphan sons were quite alone.

Many years after, the Rev William Parker speaking of John I. Bryant — touched upon that difficult period in his life saying:

“No money; no education; no influential friends; no parents!

But he had a **country** — to which his family had given their best.”

In truth, it must be said, that despite the personal tragedy it had brought him the entire war experience fascinated the young lad. With envy, he watched each New Bedford contingent march away — many of them going to Camp Joe Hooker in Lakeville. He several times played truant from school that he might follow the soldiers to camp, and, indeed, such escapades eventually sent him to Walpole State School where he served a term for truancy! In later years, when as county commissioner, he became a trustee of this school — he delighted to recount the details of this incarceration!

When he was fourteen, John I. tried to enlist, representing his age as eighteen. He was turned down, but in 1865, he got a friend of substance to certify his age as eighteen and found himself, at age fifteen a private in Battery F., Third U.S. Heavy Artillery. However, by this time, to his great disappointment, the war had ended. Yet, he thoroughly enjoyed his service career, and loved to recount stories of his stations in the moonshine districts of the south and the Indian territory in the west. He also served in the U.S. Signal Corps in San Francisco and was stationed for a time in Key West where many of the military died in an epidemic of yellow fever. These areas of the country would beckon him all his life long and many vacations during a stressful life were spent in El Paso, Texas; Hot Springs, Arkansas; and varied points in Kansas.

At the end of a two year term, he re-enlisted. On the occasion of the second discharge his separation papers read:

"Character excellent in every respect; a first class soldier and non-commissioned officer and a reliable, energetic man worthy of confidence."

There is little doubt that John I. Bryant's deep devotion to America born, perhaps, of his father's heroic sacrifice was solidly substantiated during those swash-buckling army years. He loved parades and patriotic display. In future town celebrations, he was to be a prominent figure often seen, in full uniform, astride a horse! He deeply revered Memorial Day and its significance. Indeed, when he married Lizzie B. Baker in 1876, he chose May 30th for his wedding day! On each Memorial Day, he unalterably took his place in parade with the veteran groups. Some one once suggested that he might enjoy the more colorful display of the fire department ranks. Replying, John I. said, "My place is with the veterans. Somebody is strewing flowers on my father's grave in Virginia today, and I'll never participate in a hand engine contest on Memorial Day."

INTERIM

Thus, early conditioned by expatriation, by personal loss, by poverty but toughened proudly in devotion to his new country by the demands of military life John I. Bryant returned from service to make his home in Fairhaven where he set up a stone mason's shop. It is unclear where or when he learned this trade, but he was said to have been very good at it, and it was a prime source of financial stability for him throughout most of his life. Yet, for one of his energy and ambition, subsistence alone was not enough, and impatient expectations wracked his peace of mind. In those early days, he must often have lifted his eyes from stone and busy chisel to ask himself how he could start his very own "good fight."

It is not strange, then, that he became an entranced spectator of the political scene with its drama, hot rhetoric, hard climax and incipient power. John I. began, therefore, to acquaint himself with the trends of Fairhaven politics. He discovered that the Fairhaven of his day was very much a Yankee town, and that its affairs were manipulated by a group known familiarly as the "bank crowd." They dictated who should run for office and how appropriations should be handled. This group of conservatives was swelled by Atlas Tack officials, the postmaster and a few other men of affairs, of distinction and education and they were all Republicans! So John I. joined the Democrats!

He performed numerous lowly tasks for the party, and in 1883, at the party caucus held in Phoenix Hall, he was elected delegate to the state convention. In the meantime, he unabashedly displayed his natural humor and colorful control of the English language at all town meetings.

With his foot within the political portal, he now began to develop an identity for controversial unpleasantness and astringent wit, and he fostered a series of dramatic confrontations some intentional and some not which kept him in the public eye. Some of these episodes were obviously planned; some were actually heroic; and some were just plain petty! This brash young man seemed to be everywhere at once; the cynosure of every eye. For instance, when a lamp exploded in the frame factory of A. W. Marlin & Co., a gentleman threw his overcoat over the fire and extinguished it. John I. turned out to be this gallant. He was presented with an "elegant gilded bracket" by the grateful firm, and this was duly noted in the FAIRHAVEN STAR.

Then the STAR tells us in the March 11, 1882 issue, that "there was much excitement in front of the town hall between 10 and 11. John I. Bryant charged Abner Howard, a surveyor of highways, with sitting down and reading newspapers when he was on pay by the hour. A war of words soon came to blows. Constable Reccord had to intercede."

In October, 1883, a New Bedford man by the name of Stowell who had been suffering for a fight with John I. for some time met him on Centre St. near Walnut. After an exchange of compliments, the New Bedford man closed with John I. and set his teeth in the latter's neck! Bryant threw off his assailant, and the two in the ensuing donnybrook had to be separated by Officers Reccord and Hammond. Publicity for all these exploits was quizzically provided by Editor Waldron of the STAR, who decried the sleepy tenor and conservative reactions of the town proclaiming each week from his editorial columns the inciting slogan: "Push, Fairhaven!"

It is clear Waldron thought John I. was "pushing" for they became fast friends, and it was even intimated that Waldron helped John I. with some of the scores of letters that he wrote over the years, and which appeared in the columns of the STAR.

In the hostile environment of town politics, he was forced to develop weird devices for breaking into office. In 1884, he engaged in a spirited attack on the fire department. He contended that there was an arsonist on the force, and the numerous incendiary fires were due to lack of efficiency on the part of its members. He sought to prove his horrid speculation by enumerating the particulars of each fire, and adding the suggestive comment: "and there was no moon that night!"

These words were to become his slogan and, indeed, his accusations were later justified but the outraged members of the fire department hanged him in effigy, and some unknown culprit drew an uncomplimentary sketch of him on the wall of the fire station!

FIRST OFFICE —

By 1886, John I. by varied means had assembled a following, and the town rocked when he announced for the sacred office of selectman running on an independent ticket. When, in 1887, this raw young Indian fighter was elected, the conservatives were in a state of collapse — and one old sea captain swore he would never vote for any appropriation as long as Bryant was selectman, and he never did. Each year, he voted "nay" and kept it up until he was gathered to the bosom of his ancestors.

So John I. Bryant began his very own "good fight" as a rebel against the established order, and the numerous campaigns of his long career, more often than not, were waged in stubborn resistance to a status quo which he considered weighted on the side of privilege.



— SHENANIGANS!

The early antics Bryant stooped to in winning and holding office were often crude and even noisome. Thus, were the good-mannered men of the opposition often discountenanced. Early in 1880 he curried great favor with the citizenry by solving a mysterious robbery. A townsman by the name of Benjamin Cottelle suffered a house break. Valuable property was stolen, and John I. was dramatically outraged! A New Bedford gentleman named Donnell approached John I., who seemed to have a very useful circle of most disparate "friends." Donnell produced evidence about a suspect — a sailor named Chase, who had talked loudly in a New Bedford saloon, saying that he had recently "worked a little snap in Fairhaven!" It was arranged that Donnell would lure Chase to an appropriate street corner, where they would discuss details for a sale of the loot. John I. would hide behind an adjoining fence, and listen to the conversations, thus garnering proof for an arrest.

The plan was consummated, but the time element went awry, and John I. was forced to lie on the cold ground for several hours. Half frozen, he nonetheless ran for a warrant, and the crook was arrested, after which the proceeds of the Cottelle theft were found on his person. This exploit delighted the less conservative electorate, but there was great amusement from area newspapers. Said the BROCKTON ENTERPRISE:

"They are having a burglar scare down in Fairhaven, and the vigilance committee are so sharp that it is dangerous for a citizen to go out in his own yard after dark and bring in an armful of wood!"

Yet in February of 1888, as John I. ran for a second term as selectman, the BOSTON HERALD mused:

"The friends of John I. Bryant say he is sure of election. He has done a great amount of work for the town, and the part he took in ferreting out the burglar who entered the residence of Benjamin Cottelle has helped his chances. These acts it is claimed have made many vote for Mr. Bryant, and his plurality, it is thought, will be much larger than last year, when he was elected on an independent ticket. Some of the enemies of Mr. Bryant are be-stirring themselves and say they will leave no stone unturned to defeat him."

Yet he won that election and many a one to follow. In March of 1890, the New Bedford correspondent of the BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE wrote:

"A few years ago Mr Bryant was unhonored and unsung, and without honor in his own country. Being a Democrat in a town which is Republican down to the feet and a laboring man with no other influence behind him than his own ability, his advancement to the position of leader in the board of selectmen is something remarkable. In spite of the most bitter opposition, he put through all his measures, and as opponents declared, 'if he had asked for leave to build a boulevard through the town, the meeting would have voted it.' "

THE LEARNING

So in those early years, John I. came to learn his craft, and in the political arena, found a reason for being, as well as a locale for creativity and usefulness. His campaigns were unflagging. He "ran" and he won! He "ran" and he lost! Each time he won, he savored his triumph with a certain smugness. When he lost, he ignored the incident, and "ran" the next time! Perhaps he was the prototype of many Irish lads of that era who, poor and expatriot sought an outlet for native wit and manipulative expertise in the political battles of a number of New England towns and cities.

John I. did an incredible amount of work for his town, his county and his adopted country. He made some sound friendships, but also inspired the deepest of hatred much of it well-deserved, for he abhorred to be crossed, and his scathing wit could wound and denigrate, while his retentive memory registered each slur and insult for eventual waspish recall. Moreover, again and again, he was forced to fight the old fight of the upstart against vested interest. In August of 1890, a letter to the STAR asks:

"Why is it that certain men wealthy men men who are large tax payers are so blind to their own interests and the interests of every property owner in the town of Fairhaven, that when the name of J.I. Bryant is mentioned in regard to anything pertaining to town interests, must fly into a rage; and regardless of policy, economy or the town interests oppose, condemn and use all their influence to defeat what is not only for their own interests but for public benefit if the name of 'Bryant' is used in connection with the scheme?"

In 1900, John I. ran for county commissioner, an office which he won and held in consecutive triumphs for twenty-eight years, and in 1895 President Cleveland made him post-master He filled in unpatterned reaches of the political tapestry by running for town selectman often on an independent ticket. Usually, he won, and from 1910 until his death in 1929, he served regularly in this capacity

The matter of John I.'s party affiliation began to evoke speculation, when, in 1910 he was asked by a reporter "Are you a Republican?" He answered: "Well, all I know is that I never considered myself hide-bound. I'm not wearing anyone's button. All I can say is that in future political matters, I shall use my own best judgement." The Republicans had supported him heartily, especially in county elections, and in 1914 John I. joined the Republican ranks.

JOHN I. AND THE TOWN MEETING

An examination of the records of Fairhaven town meetings spread upon the pages of the STAR, read like an unfolding play-script with John I. the protagonist. He had his own special town meeting seat in the front row. His customary stance was hands in hip pockets as he paced before the members, and when he won an election, he wore a white rose in his button-hole. Reading his arguments even today we have to grant him literate, persuasive and often moving. Moreover, he knew what he was talking about. He never failed to do his homework, and he developed an astonishing command of parliamentary procedure and legal regulation. The STAR editor tells us a story:

During one enthusiastic town meeting, a motion was made, seconded and placed before the members. The speeches came thick and fast. It seemed that the project was a favorite and would surely pass. Not a dissenting voice was heard until John I. rose in his place in the front row He walked back and forth before the audience several times surveying the group reproachfully, and then he delivered himself of the most compact and effective political speech ever heard:

"You can move it, and you can second it, and if you want to, you can vote it; but you can't **do** it because the law says you can't!"

There was absolute silence in the house!

H.H. ROGERS AND JOHN I.

During the late years of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, H.H. Rogers was busy transforming his boyhood town. A grammar school, a library, a town hall and a great stone church were raised in rapid succession while a fragrant park was made to spring from the boggy waters of a mill pond. Pure water was piped to the houses, and an intricate sewer system was constructed by experienced engineers. For all this, the townspeople were delighted and sought to honor their benefactor by making him superintendent of streets, a title which Mr Rogers greatly cherished. He had noted the hustling young politician, John I. Bryant, who was constantly setting the conservative element "on its

ears," and he liked and understood what he saw. For, of course, one did not get to be a Standard Oil executive without treading on a few toes. So John I. became Mr Rogers' assistant superintendent of streets, and served with gleeful vigor

The town appropriated only \$3,000 annually for all street work, and Mr Rogers bore all surplus expense. Streets were laid out; a crushing machine was purchased; sidewalks were paved and curbs installed. The little town came to have the best street program in the area, and John I. spent every cent of the Rogers money in the most beneficial way, often himself wielding a pick-ax or driving a snow plow when labor was scarce.

When Mr Rogers sent thousands of beautiful trees to line the new streets John I. became their guardian and protector Woe be to the horses who tore the leaves off the Rogers' trees — or the errant citizen who tied his horse to a trunk and mutilated the bark! A particularly fiery confrontation occurred when, without permission, one prominent citizen lopped off several limbs of a curb-side tree to make room for the roof of his new house! John I. addressed the situation in quiet yet furious comment:

"In the exercise of my duties, I have not been able to learn the difference between prominent citizen and common citizen — to the extent that one should be allowed to do as he had a mind to — and the other poor fellow to be made to pay the penalty!"

So John I. added the tasks of tree warden, surveyor and constable to his many duties as assistant superintendent of streets, assuming most of these extra responsibilities without pay



— JOHN I. AND FORT PHOENIX —

It is appropriate that John I. Bryant with his early involvement in military matters should have had close association with the fortunes of old Fort Phoenix. His first connection was a glowing experience of youthful fervor and occurred on August 31, 1874. Ulysses S. Grant had been vacationing at Oak Bluffs, and announced a visit to New Bedford Harbor on his private yacht. John I. — just twenty-four, his brother, William, and as many comrades from Civil War units as they could muster — planned a fanfare of greeting from the Fairhaven fort's old guns as the general's ship came into the harbor. The cannon were badly rusted, and mountings rotted, but generous contribution of materials and terrific effort on the part of the young zealots — put them in shape. To their general's keen delight, a mighty 21-gun salvo greeted him as his yacht entered New Bedford waters!

Many years later, in 1926 John I. and his fellow selectman, Thomas Whitfield and Isaac Babbitt, were to be instrumental in obtaining the old fort in permanent acquisition for the town. In 1923, the federal government had formed a policy of disposition of old forts not in use. They were assessed for current land value and offered first to state, to county and last to municipality

The Fairhaven Improvement Association had expressed interest in obtaining the old fort, and investigations were instituted. Mr. Bryant, who had remained in touch over the years with Mrs. Cara Rogers Broughton, wrote to her immediately telling her of the old fort's availability. She immediately replied asking him to arrange for the purchase of the fort on her behalf.

"I have received your letter of April 28," she wrote, "with papers enclosed, and hope that you will come to some satisfactory agreement with the county. I am quite sure that my father with his love for Fairhaven would not wish to feel that Fort Phoenix with its traditions should go to anyone outside the town."

The three selectmen raised privately the sum of \$5,000, the required purchase price — and Mr Bryant made three trips to Washington to clinch the sale. On April of 1926, Mr and Mrs. Broughton came to Fairhaven, and on April 13th, in the office of the selectmen, Mrs. Broughton presented Mr Bryant a check for \$5,000 assuming the cost of purchase in memory of her father. Fort Phoenix became that day, the property of the town of Fairhaven forever! A few days later, in a beautiful display of gratitude — hundreds of Fairhaven school children lined the ramparts of the old fort and waved flags of England and America as the Broughton yacht passed from the harbor

COUNTY COMMISSIONER

During the period (1893-1902) the New Bedford-Fairhaven bridge was in process of re-construction. The Bristol County Commissioners had charge of this huge undertaking, and a noisome series of petty scandals erupted. The legislature of Massachusetts was aroused to interference, and the building of the bridge was taken out of the hands of the county commissioners and given to state experts. There was great resentment on the part of the people of the county upon exposure of this double dealing, and in the election of 1890, they revolted against the "county ring" and elected John I. Bryant as a county commissioner.

Because of these circumstances, John I. seemed to bring to his duties as a member of the county board, a special sensitiveness and a developing satisfaction in his craft as politician. Moreover, in county service, he was introduced to more intricate situations than he had faced as a town officer.

For example, he was involved in much humane consideration growing out of responsibility for the county hospital, jails and training units. Expanding county building programs concerned him, and he was tenaciously watchful of expenditure and building quality during the construction of the Bristol County Registry of Deeds and the District Court House in New Bedford.

Membership on this board took him on innumerable trips to Boston to appear before state legislative committees. He gained in expertise and sophistication as he pursued these duties and it is apparent that the broader reaches of these responsibilities forced him to take a more philosophical and thoughtful approach to the political adventure. Of course, he grew older, too, and with that natural mellowing he enjoyed the evidence of trust which continuous approval of the electorate voted him.

It was in this office, then, that he began to rise above the more petty issues of daily town hall politics, and to survey in a broader frame, the role which an altruistic government might assume in long-term benefit to the citizenry.

Under persistent pressure from the state to relinquish established county roles, John I. came to fear acutely a danger of centralization. Under varied circumstances, he pointed out in addressing the state legislative committees the virtue of keeping all possible legislation close to the people. He asked:

"Why should someone in trouble be forced to come to the state house in Boston for assistance? The county officials are much nearer and are better acquainted with the facts of such cases."

He dealt with the selection of food for inmates of county institutions:

"One man who tried to sell me cocoa five years old for the use of our tubercular patients told me he was sent to us by a state official. He asked 12¢ a pound for the cocoa. I can buy it in the open market for 5¢! Just because I come from a country district he thought that I was a hayseed. Well, I **do** raise hay, but I feed it to the **horse!**"

He told the Kiwanis Club of New Bedford.

"If the state gets control of county affairs, it is only a step on the way towards control of city and town affairs."

FAVORITE LEGISLATION

Ever sensitive to the suffering of women, John I. found distressing his dealings with women prisoners in county jails. A favorite bill inaugurated by him, and after much scrutiny, finally passed by the legislature, enacted a law allowing an expectant mother to be removed from a penal institution before giving birth.

"If I have my way," said John I., "no child will ever be born in this state with the shackles of its mother's sins on its ankles!"

Mr Bryant spent twenty-eight years as a member of the county board more often than not as its chairman. He was elected again and again under both Democratic and Republican auspices and remained a member until his death. He developed a remarkable reputation for honesty and steadfastness during his years of service on this county board.

THE "CZAR"!

Back home, however, in the far reaches of his town, John I. was still forced to the role of doughty gladiator. Although his policies were usually wise his truculent explosiveness enraged, and it was frequently alleged that he was "running the town" and that "new blood" was needed! A citizen letter to one out-of-town newspaper called him an absolute "Czar" upon which the STAR broke into out-raged editorial, and John I. piteously queried where this "new blood" was when Alden Road was rebuilt; when the Union Wharf was conditioned; when the academy building was renovated!

Yet, it was all great fun, and John I. thrived on it, and the NEW BEDFORD STANDARD in 1922 was moved to remark:

"Mr Bryant has been in public office a good part of his life; yet more often than not, he has had to fight for the elections he has won. We dare say he has preferred to have it so; and that he relished the contests that have been forced upon him ready to do battle at any time in support of his convictions."

— LAST YEARS

When he was seventy years old, John I. took his first trip to Ireland. He greatly admired the smooth green slopes of his native land — but there was some delay in arranging for the return journey, and John I. was most apprehensive that he might miss the next town meeting! He declared that when he saw the Statue of Liberty again — he wanted to throw his arms about her neck!

On his seventieth birthday the NEW BEDFORD STANDARD wrote:

“Fast of step and clear of eye with body as healthy and intellect as keen as when at the age of seventeen he hunted moonshiners in the Blue Ridge John I. Bryant, county commissioner and selectman, has somehow managed to be out when old Father Time called to bend the backs and shake dust into the eyes of those who were in their early youth in Civil War days. He will not stay at home like a doddering old man to observe his anniversary. He will go to his office as usual or to Boston or wherever the duties of his position call him. Birthdays mean nothing to Mr. Bryant.”

In January, 1928, John I. was asked if — at seventy-eight, he would toss his hat in the political ring once more. His reply was quick and unequivocal:

“My hat has **always** been in the ring!”

So, for the last time, he entered the selectman's fight — only to be felled by a dangerous bronchial infection. He could no longer campaign for himself — so his friends took up the task with enthusiasm. There were campaign speeches, torch-light parades, radio rallies and house-to-house canvassing. John I. won the election by 476 votes. The town meeting of February, 1928 was the first John I. had missed in forty years. At its close, the entire assembly rose to its feet as one man, in a splendid tribute of affection for one of its own.

THE “GOOD FIGHT”

John I. Bryant died on January 20, 1929. To Mrs. Bryant, from England — where she was herself mourning the death of a beloved husband — a long time friend sent this message:

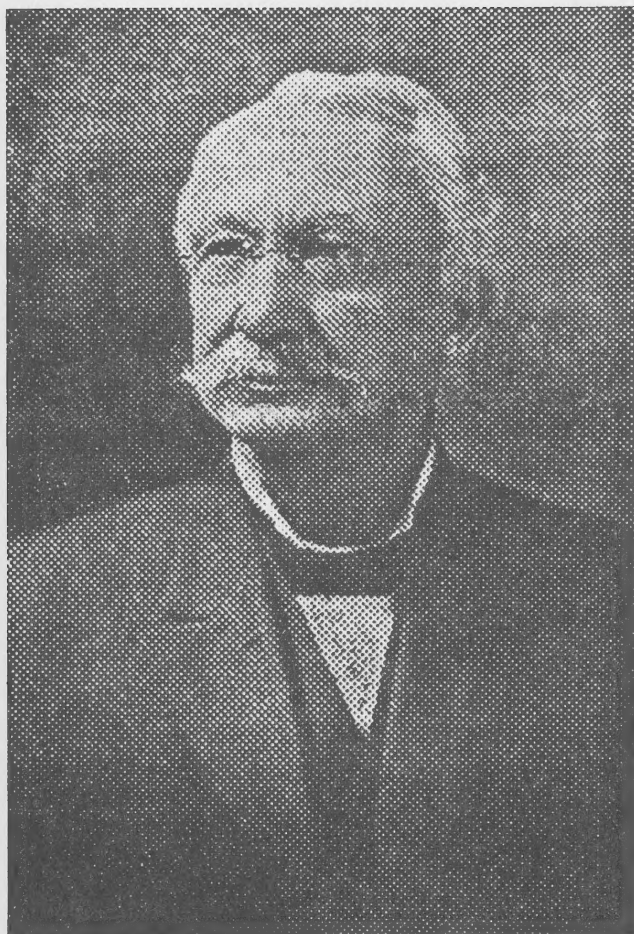
“Fairhaven has lost one of its finest citizens; my deepest sympathy and I mourn with you. Cara Broughton”

When his will was examined, it was found that John I. had left an estate of about \$1,000. Scrawled in blue pencil upon the margins of the document — and then partially erased — were the words:

“I have fought a good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith.”

These words appear also on the bronze plate affixed to the family monument in Riverside Cemetery where John I. Bryant is buried.

He had indeed fought a “good fight” — and in so doing — has become a legend in the town he loved and served.



John A. Bryant

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